

BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

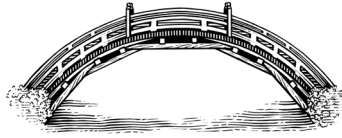
Enze Han's

The Ripple Effect:

China's Complex Presence in Southeast Asia

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Planned and Not: Chinese Influence from the Ground Up in Southeast Asia

Alice D. Ba

At a time of growing Chinese power and influence, Enze Han's *The Ripple Effect: China's Complex Presence in Southeast Asia* adds an important voice to the conversation on China–Southeast Asia relations. Han seeks to complicate grand explanations about Chinese strategic action and its effects. In this effort, he joins some notable others¹ in disaggregating both “China” and “Southeast Asia” in ways that display a complex ecosystem involving a multiplicity of actors with their own interests and logics.

But Han's book is different from these other contributions to the field in at least two key ways. First, his approach, far more than others, shifts attention away from the state. This is especially true of chapters 5–8 but is evident in earlier chapters as well. Thus, where other works might highlight how local substate actors interpret and implement the grand directives from on high, Han gives greatest attention to how local nonstate actors shape the trajectory of Chinese influence from the ground up.

Second and most important, his attention to unintended consequences offers a notable contrast to the overwhelming attention to intentional strategy found in recent discussions and commentary on China–Southeast Asian relations and foreign policy. As Han demonstrates in each of the book's chapters, too many studies have in essence correlated effects with intention. By contrast, Han focuses on the “unintended consequences of purposive social action” (p. 10). This he sees as the book's distinctive contribution. And indeed it is. It is a rare approach that recognizes the messiness of a social reality in which many actors are operating with their own logics and contributing their own interactive effects and pressures on relations. The “ripple effect” in the book's title neatly captures this main thesis: namely, the radiating effects of Chinese policies on “adjacent” and

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¹ See, for example, Min Ye, *The Belt Road and Beyond: State-Mobilized Globalization in China: 1998–2018* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, *Fractured China: How State Transformation Is Shaping China's Rise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); and David M. Lampton, Selina Ho, and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

“interrelated” functional, geographic, and relational fields, each sensitive to the other.

As should be clear, there are several things to like about Han’s book. Three contributions are especially worthy of note. The first is Han’s contextualization of China’s engagements with Southeast Asia, which he does in more ways than one. The importance of context is highlighted in the discussions of past historical dynamics and in discussions of coinciding and interacting great-power geopolitics. Both contexts serve to illustrate the main point above, which is that purposive action moves through all sorts of filters and conditions that affect its ultimate outcomes. Historical context creates both interpretive and institutional conditions that filter the translation of Chinese actions. The ups and downs of trade and economic relations are also situated against macro-level changes in China’s and Southeast Asia’s domestic economies and in global and regional political economies (including U.S. trade policies), human migrations, and generational change, as well as the unexpected and dramatic disruptions created by the Covid-19 pandemic, which was not so long ago. Put another way, Southeast Asia’s responses to Chinese actors and engagements are about much more than a choice between the United States and China, for example.

A second contribution, also suggested above, is how the study in different ways disaggregates both China and Southeast Asia to local and individual levels. As noted, more so than some works that focus on local substate actors, especially at the provincial levels, Han concentrates most on individual and societal actors, which are an important source of the “unintended consequences” he emphasizes. These actors come in all forms—big companies and small and medium-sized enterprises, tourists and students, kinship bonds, and illicit networks, among others. In fact, one common thread throughout the book is that there will always be opportunistic actors whose interests have little to do with the state except to take advantage of state policies, loopholes, gray areas, and spaces that states have vacated or banned. And while their actions may not be orchestrated by Beijing, they do influence perceptions, livelihoods, and the overall trajectory of relations.

The Southeast Asia side of the China–Southeast Asia equation is also featured. While Han focuses most on the China side, his cases also show how Southeast Asian states and societal actors (often at the local and individualized levels) have their own domestic and individual priorities and responses that, in turn, contribute to the incentive structures in which Chinese actors operate. As he highlights in several areas, synergies matter and can even be

the determining factor in relations. China's expanded presence and influence in Southeast Asia depends greatly on how much its policies speak to Southeast Asian state priorities and agendas as well as the needs, interests, and concerns of local and societal-level Southeast Asian actors.

Upon finishing Han's book, I was left with questions about some broader takeaways. The last chapter offered several points of advice to Beijing about what it should or should not do in terms of state policies, which seemed a bit of a disconnect from the book's rich discussion on the complex ecosystem of actors, interests, and logics operating (to quote Min Ye's excellent book) beneath "the water-line."² My interest in larger takeaways also reflects questions about some of Han's cases, especially as there is some unevenness in his discussions (Thailand, for example, dominates as a case study). In general, discussions typically focus on a few (and sometimes, just one or two) emblematic cases, which can be countries, companies, or groups, to illustrate the dynamics that Han seeks to highlight. What is not consistently clear, though, is the logic as to why some cases are selected over others. Consequently, it is sometimes difficult to know what larger conclusions we should draw beyond the need to be attuned to local, domestic, and historical contexts. For example, are cases meant to illustrate the China dynamics of specific subregions or simply a specific state, a category of development or economic exchange, a kind of politics or a type of response, history or practice in China's engagements? Do they show the conditions of Chinese influence? How illustrative are these cases across Southeast Asian countries? Why do the chapters on the Sinosphere and migration, for example, not include greater discussion of other cases beyond Thailand? As Han notes, there are important differences among states and populations in their views, assimilation/exclusion practices, and migration histories that shape relations. Southeast Asia is a region with distinctively diverse populations and states, each with its own distinct history with China and engagement with the Sinosphere, so it would be difficult to be comprehensively inclusive. But for this reason also, it seems important to be more explicit about the parameters of what the cases are seen to illustrate.

All this said, *The Ripple Effect* is a welcome contribution on the varied actors and individual nonstate drivers that affect China's influence and outcomes in Southeast Asia whether Beijing wants them or not. The book's implications about the significance of unintended consequences alone make it a worthy read. The chapters present a complex and rich picture

² Ye, *The Belt Road*, 5.

of China's influence as a country with many uncoordinated parts, all operating in diverse Southeast Asian spaces that are colored as much by past practices, histories, and a wide cast of nonstate actors as they are by contemporary geopolitics. ◆

China Seeks Out Southeast Asia: More Than Just Economic Dependency

Benjamin Ho

While China's growing presence and influence in Southeast Asia is a geopolitical fact, most China watchers tend to focus on the Chinese state or limit their analysis to leadership factors (in particular the person of President Xi Jinping), bureaucratic factors (e.g., the People's Liberation Army or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), or ideological factors (e.g., the rise of Chinese nationalism). What is less discussed are the nonstate sectors within China, such as private businesses and Chinese migrants, and the extent to which these groups are able to exert influence in China's external relations, particularly in Southeast Asia.

As such, *The Ripple Effect: China's Complex Presence in Southeast Asia* represents a valuable contribution to the growing corpus of works seeking to explain the mechanisms of Beijing's relations with its regional neighbors. Author Enze Han brings to the table a wealth of experience gleaned from extensive fieldwork in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Singapore, and Thailand—countries with deep and relatively good relations with China.

In the book, Han argues persuasively that local actors within Southeast Asia are not simply passive bystanders or recipients of the Chinese state's political influence but do in fact possess agency in their engagement with Beijing. More intriguingly, Han posits the argument that in China–Southeast Asia relations the result of engagement is often less predictable than what would be structurally imagined (i.e., China exerting influence in a unidirectional manner), wrapped in unintended consequences. Han borrows from the American sociologist Robert Merton's idea that, “with the complex interaction which constitutes society, action ramifies, its consequences are not restricted to the specific area in which they were initially intended to center [but] occur in interrelated fields explicitly ignored at the time of action” (p. 10). Seen this way, China's actions in Southeast Asia have a “ripple effect,” in which policy effects may exhibit characteristics originally unintended.

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This ripple effect, Han argues, can be seen in various subfields, including governance and authoritarian regimes, economic influence, Chinese language and culture, consumption, illicit political economies, migration, and diaspora activities. In chapters on each of these areas, Han skillfully dissects the key actors in Southeast Asian states and shows persuasively how regional actors have responded to growing Chinese influence. As an observer of Chinese politics, it is intriguing—though perhaps not surprising—that beyond official speak, there exists a rich repository of voices within Southeast Asian capitals contesting China’s presence in their own countries.

For instance, in chapter 4, “Contesting Re-Sinicization,” Han observes that there exists a strong anti-China sentiment online among Thai society’s younger generation, which is dissatisfied with military rule in Thailand since a coup in 2014. Hence, there is a perception that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tacitly condones the military there. Support for this view grew in the aftermath of protest movements in Hong Kong, in which comparisons were made between democracy movements in both places as well as in government suppression of them. As Han argues, “the cultural politics of modern-day Chinese nationalism have come into direct confrontation with resistances within the Sinosphere, into which Thailand has ultimately been pulled” (p. 76). From this perspective, Chinese leaders would have to be aware of the unintended consequences of their political actions—not unlike the United States, whose exuberance for liberal democracy has also run up against other political regimes in Southeast Asia.

The issue of diaspora engagement, which is tackled in chapter 8, is likewise instructive for China watchers. Given that the appeal to overseas Chinese “as a patriotic force to assist in the political and economic needs of the homeland has been a constant theme in modern Chinese history” (p. 132), Han’s analysis of how diaspora relations work in Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand proffers some useful insights into how best to understand the Chinese state’s diasporic engagement with its neighbors. Han rightly argues that this “securitization of identity” can be problematic for the home state of the diaspora, particularly if the ethnic group is viewed as a political threat. For example, in the case of Indonesia, domestic political factions continue to manipulate public opinion against the local Chinese community for political reasons, though this has considerably diminished since the downfall of the Suharto regime in 1998. Be that as it may, the point to be made—as Han observes—is that in light of China’s growing power and

influence in the region, “the Chinese diaspora is now considered a crucial toolkit in the CCP’s vision of promoting China’s soft power abroad and raising its international standing through public diplomacy” (p. 149).

Having noted the above, any discussion of China’s outreach to Southeast Asia needs to include the broader context of U.S.-China relations, especially within political-security spheres. To be fair, Han acknowledges that he specifically excluded the security dimension of China’s regional outreach, thus to some extent limiting the scope of his analysis (p. 154). However, I would argue that any assessment of China’s regional influence could be deemed to be partial and incomplete to the degree that security factors are not included. For example, China’s maritime disputes with Vietnam and Philippines—to name just two countries—have clouded how it is perceived in Southeast Asia, even among the countries with which it does not have maritime disputes. Indeed, reoccurring iterations of *The State of Southeast Asia* annual survey report by Singapore’s ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute (which Han also cites) have highlighted concerns among Southeast Asian elites toward China’s expanding regional economic influence. In other words, issues on the security front often end up torpedoing any marginal gains that obtained from economic and cultural spheres. To use the book’s own analogy, security priorities often have a greater net ripple effect than other areas of influence. Not surprisingly, despite critiques that the United States has not been economically engaged enough in the region, or regarding Washington’s liberal ideas, the security presence the United States affords the region goes some way to mollify any complaints Southeast Asian actors might have against it. Seen this way, Han’s views toward this security-economic nexus would have been enlightening for his readership.

Notwithstanding this exclusion on the security dimension, *The Ripple Effect* is a thoroughly researched piece of work and provides new and useful insights into Chinese regional diplomacy. By defying neat binary categories about the nature and extent of Chinese influence, the book usefully highlights the dynamic and sometimes hidden web of China’s relations with the region. The grand narrative of Southeast Asian economic interdependence with China is an often-cited storyline, but the reality is much more complicated. ♦

Love or Fear? China in Southeast Asia

Sharon Seah

Is it better to be loved than to be feared? Southeast Asia has been grappling with the question of a rising China for more than a decade. By now, perhaps the question should no longer be how to manage a rising China but how to manage a *risen* China, one that is assertive and aggressive, ready to challenge international rules and norms. This China feels it deserves to construct a different global structure because it was not present when the rules were set. This China thinks of its diaspora as an extension of its soft-power influence. This China has a governance system that does not necessarily sync with other governance systems in the region. A dominant China.

The proximate effect of China in Southeast Asia increasingly extends beyond the ethnic, cultural, and social ties of the old diaspora to political and economic spheres of influence. Year after year since 2019, a survey of Southeast Asian elite opinion by the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute finds China to be the most influential power in the region economically, politically, and strategically.¹ In 2024, 50.5% of regional thought leaders surveyed chose China over the United States in a hypothetical binary choice question on which state the region should align with if it were forced to choose.² This result was further affirmed when, in another question, the survey results ranked China as the most strategically relevant dialogue partner to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), coming a mere 0.17 points ahead of the United States.³ Yet the region’s trust in China remains persistently low at 24.5%, and distrust is high at 50.1% in 2024.⁴

To be loved and respected, not feared, must be the answer to that age-old question. But without understanding the component parts of what makes a whole, it is difficult to tell if China is more feared, loved, or both.

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¹ Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024) ≈ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-State-of-SEA-2024.pdf>.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

In his new book *The Ripple Effect: China's Complex Presence in Southeast Asia*, Enze Han critically examines how China's influence permeates the region, how different actors (whether under state direction or not) perform their roles, and how the different Southeast Asian countries perceive them. Han also demonstrates that influence is not a one-way street. Using a combination of case studies and mini-surveys, Han delves into individual Southeast Asian countries' interactions with China at both the state and nonstate levels and studies how countries may or may not pushback against Chinese state motivations to shape the desired outcomes for their own foreign and economic policies.

The question of China in Southeast Asia has become so complex because of China's immense influential power and what it could potentially do, overtly or covertly, to change the political, economic, and social fabric of countries and societies in the region. New analytical frameworks are needed to dive deep and comprehend China's long-term motivations toward Southeast Asia. Countries in the region need a new paradigm with which to understand and frame Chinese engagement, both bilaterally and regionally, and to figure out how to navigate China's intentions and outcomes (whether deliberate or not) arising from its extensive influence. This is where, to the extent possible, Han's book fills the analytical gap.

Certainly, one could argue that China has always been a resident power in Asia, albeit a dormant one until Deng Xiaoping opened the doors in 1978 and initiated China's re-entry onto the global stage. But it was only in the early 2000s that Southeast Asia began to feel the weight of China's presence. Southeast Asia is no stranger to dealing with extraregional powers. The region's instinctive need to achieve a balance of power is intrinsically wound up with its colonial past, Cold War divides, and the intraregional conflicts in its modern history. To protect itself from external interference, ASEAN used the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which was originally an agreement to prevent intraregional conflict between the group's members, as a prerequisite for external parties to ensure that peaceful relations remain a mainstay. China signed on to the treaty in 2003.

In Han's theoretical discussion on the causalities of actions, he highlights that the intervention of outside forces could result in the transformation of a state's intended goals. It would have been interesting to see whether ASEAN, as a collective group of ten countries, succeeded in making any interventions to change China's course, given that individual ASEAN states may not have the ability to do so alone or bilaterally. Did ASEAN's initiation of a free trade agreement (FTA) with China

in 2002—China’s first-ever FTA—change the course of China’s global engagement, creating the space for its greater economic interactions in the region and leading both parties to become the other’s largest trading partner? Conceivably, the ASEAN-China FTA laid a foundation for China’s economic engagement with the region. Despite the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the global economy and the deepening Sino-U.S. rivalry, Chinese influence on trade, investment, and economics has continued to deepen. It would seem inevitable, with the United States likely to become more isolationist and protectionist under a second Donald Trump presidency, that Chinese economic influence will become even more entrenched in Southeast Asia over time.

In chapter 2 focusing on authoritarian resilience, Han observes that China does not specifically seek out authoritarian governments to sustain its rule. Hence, while it would be intuitive to conceive of Vietnam and Laos as friendly authoritarian governments, China’s influence in those countries may in fact be limited. Instead, Han presents Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand as examples in which “the “China factor” works through existing domestic political divisions, whereby a country’s “domestic institutions and political contestations” (p. 32) help facilitate China’s influence. In the case of Thailand, for instance, China’s influence is welcomed by those who are supportive of that influence, while the United States is viewed with hostility due to domestic political polarization. Using this lens, it would have been helpful if Han had investigated why, conversely, Vietnam tends to view the United States with greater positivity than China, despite the ideological leanings Vietnam shares with China and the similarity in authoritarian styles of governance.

The role of the Chinese diaspora and contestations of “re-Sinicization” are also examined in the book (chapters 4 and 8). Han usefully discusses the various levels of “Chinese-ness,” how these contestations are unfolding, and how China taps into its soft power. “Telling China’s story well” (*jiang hao Zhongguo de gushi*), a phrase introduced by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013, relies on nonstate actors, including ordinary citizens, Chinese diaspora, and friendly foreign media outlets, to narrate China’s struggles and dreams and thus extend China’s discursive power. A 2022 analysis of Chinese embassies’ media strategy in Southeast Asia found three common purposes: (1) to denounce Western narratives about China, (2) to highlight the positive effects of harmonizing China-ASEAN

ties while downplaying the negatives, and (3) to promote China's achievements.⁵

China's deployment of discursive, narrative-shaping strategies has not worked beautifully. It could be due to how China taps its diaspora. Situated at the crossroads of major historical trade routes, Southeast Asia is home to two major diasporas—Chinese and Indian. Yet the way in which the two countries engage with their respective diasporas is very different. Whereas China sees diaspora networks in Southeast Asia as valuable assets to extend its economic influence and as part of its broader soft-power strategy, India frames its relationship with its diaspora more loosely around cultural diplomacy and economic collaboration. Further, China occasionally invokes the shared ethnicity of Chinese communities in the region to rally support for or prevent backlash against its policies. This securitization of diaspora ties is a sensitive area—countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have strict policies against foreign interference. It is interesting that Han decided not to examine Chinese influence in Singapore, a state with an ethnic Chinese majority. Singapore's focus on foreign interference sharpened considerably with the highly publicized case in 2017 of Huang Jing, a prominent Chinese-American academic in the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy who was expelled for being an agent of influence, presumably for China, although the government declined to specify which country he had acted for.⁶ This was brought back into public view with the subsequent U.S. arrest of Singaporean Dickson Yeo, Huang Jing's PhD student, in 2020 on charges of spying for China.⁷

Despite the wide acknowledgment of its economic, political, and strategic influence, more than half of *The State of Southeast Asia* survey respondents say that they had either "little or no confidence" that China would "do the right thing."⁸ The majority of those who say they trust China do so because of its vast economic prowess and political will to provide leadership, whereas those who distrust the country point to fear of how

⁵ Wang Zheng, "'Tell China's Story Well': Chinese Embassies; Media Outreach in Southeast Asian Media," ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute, ISEAS Perspective, no. 2022/90, September 12, 2022. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-90-tell-chinas-story-well-chinese-embassies-media-outreach-in-southeast-asian-media-by-wang-zheng>.


⁶ Roystone Sim, "LKY School Professor Huang Jing Banned, Has PR Cancelled, for Being Agent of Influence for Foreign Country," *Straits Times*, August 4, 2017. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/lky-school-professor-huang-jing-banned-has-pr-cancelled-for-being-agent-of-influence-for>.

⁷ "Singaporean National Sentenced to 14 Months in Prison for Acting in the United States as an Illegal Agent of Chinese Intelligence," U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, October 9, 2020, updated July 13, 2022. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/singaporean-national-sentenced-14-months-prison-acting-united-states-illegal-agent-chinese>.

⁸ Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*, 56.

China could wield its economic power to threaten their countries' interests and sovereignty.

The backlash toward China's efforts goes beyond the persistent low trust in the region. Several issues stand in the way of China gaining favorability in Southeast Asia. If China wants to win Southeast Asian hearts and minds, it needs to address its use of strong-arm tactics in the South China Sea and Mekong region, interference in domestic affairs through the use of social media, and the use of economic tools to punish countries for their foreign policy choices, to name a few.

So, is China more loved or feared? Han's research shows that China is not a unitary actor in Southeast Asia. Its presence is complicated by nonstate actors and by the Chinese state itself deploying different strategies that could backfire. Just as China is not a unitary whole, nor the only actor of consequence, other state and nonstate actors could over time change the currently asymmetrical relationship between China and Southeast Asia if they deploy agency in decision-making. Countries in the region appear cognizant in wanting to diversify their economic relationships and engage in new and flexible plurilateral ties. This is evidenced by recent decisions by Thailand and Indonesia to apply for membership in the BRICS and begin the accession process to the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development,⁹ and by states that are joining minilaterals, such as the Philippines with Australia, Japan, and the United States. Others, looking to preserve the World Trade Organization's dispute settlement system, are calling for more parties to join the body's Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement.¹⁰ The region's preferred mode of enhancing its agency is to call for strengthened multilateral cooperation in the face of a fractured world order. 

⁹ Prashanth Parameswaran, "BRICS Southeast Asia Hype Belies Wider Indo-Pacific Institutional Stakes," Observer Research Foundation, November 13, 2024 ~ <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/brics-southeast-asia-hype-belies-wider-indo-pacific-institutional-stakes>; and Spencer Feingold and Charlotte Edmond, "Why Indonesia and Thailand's Bid for the OECD Could Be a Game Changer," World Economic Forum, August 16, 2024 ~ <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/08/indonesia-thailand-oecd-membership-economic-growth-southeast-asia>.

¹⁰ Joost Pauwelyn, "The WTO's Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA): What's New?" *World Trade Review* 22, no. 5 (2023): 693–701 ~ <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474745623000204>.

The Complexity of China–Southeast Asia Relations

Alvin Camba

In *The Ripple Effect: China’s Complex Presence in Southeast Asia*, Enze Han argues that China’s interactions with Southeast Asian countries are complex. He situates the book against the dominance of state-to-state interactions in the field of international relations and then advances a conceptual framework that combines the characterization of the “sending” country, in this case China, being a decentralized, multifaceted, and diverse nation, with “host country” factors, in this case the multiplicity of actors in Southeast Asia that interact with the Chinese state. The book’s theoretical argument draws on the concept of intended and unintended influence, suggesting that is difficult to empirically demonstrate whether China’s influence on the host country—be it through trade, tourism, or investment—translates into the actual intended outcomes the Chinese government desires. In other words, influence creates unintended consequences, particularly in the interactions between Chinese nonstate actors and the nonstate actors of the host country that then impact the state-to-state relations. This theoretical framework draws significantly from the older sociological concept of “unintended consequences of purposive social action” that points to unintended consequences beyond those that have been designed.

To support these arguments, Han presents empirical evidence in seven chapters. Chapter 2 outlines authoritarian resiliency, identifying three modes of China’s indirect support for autocracy—sustenance, indirect investment, and aid—and modeling them using the cases of Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand. Chapter 3 illustrates the impacts of aid and investment, showcasing the varied patterns of Chinese manufacturing firms, electric vehicles, and other investors entering Southeast Asia’s special economic zones. Chapter 4 examines the promotion of Chinese-language education in Thailand, outlining the processes of re-Sinicization and re-territorialization that aims to advance China’s soft power. Chapter 5 looks at how China’s domestic consumption creates ripple effects of social and environmental consequences. Chapter 6 delves into the illicit political economy, analyzing online gambling, scamming, and the ties of such activities to the regional political economy. Chapter 7 explores mass

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migration from China to Southeast Asia, while chapter 8 analyzes the engagement of the longer-standing Chinese “diaspora” in Southeast Asia with these newcomers.

Two key strengths significantly set *The Ripple Effect* apart from others. First, the book seamlessly integrates diverse engagements, ranging from trade and autocracy to migration and consumption. This broader scope utilizes the framework of influence and unintended consequences to examine multifaceted engagements across sectors and themes between China and Southeast Asia. Second, this ability to tackle various themes allows Han to interrogate an array of conceptual issues surrounding these topics. For example, chapter 2 explores three modes of authoritarian engagement across three Southeast Asian countries, drawing on Evelyn Goh’s idea of influence and presenting multiple cases to the debates on China and autocracy.¹ Chapter 8 introduces the concept of diaspora politics to study the Chinese and “ethnic” Chinese in Southeast Asia. While most books concentrate on one key conceptual discussion, this book engages with many in a variety of ways.

While the book makes compelling arguments, it has some limitations as well. First, the assertion that China’s engagement with Southeast Asia is marked by unintended consequences does little to advance the existing literature. I agree with the author that much of the political science and international relations scholarship on China–Southeast Asia relations has focused on state-to-state dynamics and security concerns. However, a considerable body of work outside these disciplines has also examined the involvement of nonstate actors and multiple stakeholders in this relationship. Numerous unintended consequences of China’s engagement in Southeast Asia have been documented in a wide range of studies from mining in the Philippines and Indonesia to Laotian resource sectors to energy and land development policies in Indonesia and Malaysia.² Thus, the

¹ Evelyn Goh, “The Modes of China’s Influence: Cases from Southeast Asia,” *Asian Survey* 54, no. 5 (2014): 825–48.

² See, for example, Alvin A. Camba, “The Direction, Patterns, and Practices of Chinese Investments in Philippine Mining,” in *China’s Backyard: Policies and Politics of Chinese Resource Investments in Southeast Asia*, ed. Jason Morris-Jung (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017), 129–54; Alvin Camba, “The Unintended Consequences of National Regulations: Large-Scale–Small-Scale Relations in Philippine and Indonesian Nickel Mining,” *Resources Policy* 74 (2021): 102213; Juliet Lu, “For Profit or Patriotism? Balancing the Interests of the Chinese State, Host Country and Firm in the Lao Rubber Sector,” *China Quarterly* 250 (2022): 332–55; Angela Tritto, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: From Perceptions to Realities in Indonesia’s Coal Power Sector,” *Energy Strategy Reviews* 34 (2021): 100624; and Guanle Lim and Keng Khoo Ng, “Capital Mobility and Centre–State Relations: Unpacking the Spatial Configuration of Real Estate Investment in Iskandar Malaysia,” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11, no. 5 (2023): 1012–28.

claim that China's engagement is complex and unintended is not entirely novel—how could such engagement not be, given the nature of China and Southeast Asia with so many diverse actors and interests involved?

Second, although it may have been beyond the scope of the book to explore, China's complex engagement, which has created numerous unintended consequences, is not unique to Southeast Asia. In other words, many of the processes illustrated in *The Ripple Effect* can be found in other regions, begging the question of whether Southeast Asia is a special case. Similar complex interactions and engagements can and have been observed in other parts of the world.³

Third, and related, the book's framing of China–Southeast Asia engagement primarily focuses on the dominance of international relations scholarship in the study of this region. However, this analysis suffers from two interrelated problems. On one hand, the discussion of factors such as proximity, geography, and tourism does not adequately elaborate on what makes Southeast Asia a distinct and crucial region, while migration and diaspora politics are presented as empirical illustrations rather than as framing devices. In other words, the author did not center the book enough around the unique features of Southeast Asia. On the other hand, the framing around international relations scholarship to argue about complexity and unintended consequences makes it difficult to generalize findings that can be applied in the broader literatures. In other words, the treatment of the countries and cases is not conceptual enough, except for the notion of unintended consequences.

A fourth issue is the separation between state and private actors in both China and Southeast Asia. Indeed, there is a question in Chinese political economy of whether the notions of “state” and “private” can meaningfully distinguish the modes of engagements and interactions of Chinese actors.⁴ Similarly, in Southeast Asia, many actors deemed to be private involve a lot of state actors through state-led investments or government-led corporations. As Angela Tritto and I have illustrated, a more nuanced approach to


³ See, for example, C.K. Lee, *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Miriam Driessen, *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019); Victoria Chonn Ching, Guanlie Lim, and Alvin Camba, “Special Session Introduction—Strategies and Adaptations to China's Rise Across Asia,” ed. Victoria Chonn Ching, Guanlie Lim, and Alvin Camba, special session, *Asian Perspective* 48, no. 3 (2024): 379–85; and Umesh Moramudali and Thilina Panduwawala, “Chinese Financing and Domestic Politics in Sri Lanka—Parallel Evolution across Mid-20th vs 21st Century Episodes of Bilateral Interactions,” *Asian Perspective* 48, no. 3 (2024): 409–33.

⁴ Alvin Camba, “The Sino-Centric Capital Export Regime: State-Backed and Flexible Capital in the Philippines,” *Development and Change* 51, no. 4 (2020): 970–97.

categorizing actors in Southeast Asia might be firm size rather than simply state or private.⁵ This is because private actors in China, whether they are state-affiliated or part of associations, often maintain significant links with the state. Additionally, state actors in smaller regions may not wield substantial power beyond their own municipality or city. In other words, a simplistic state-private dichotomy fails to capture complexities.

Fifth, the book could have done more to identify the different facets of the relationship between Southeast Asian countries and China or pinpoint key factors that make these countries more similar or different in their dealings with China. This would have allowed it to better illustrate meaningful variation across themes. While there are commonalities among Southeast Asian states, there are also significant differences rooted in political traditions, cultural variations, and colonial history. The author might have been better off framing the book around the Mekong countries as borderland states with China rather than the entire Southeast Asian region, given that the author's data largely draws from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, with only cursory mention of or examples from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. The methods of data collection and the extensive fieldwork and interviews could have been situated more robustly in the book.

Finally, the argument presents unevenly across the chapters, stronger in some but weaker in others. As seen in the book and unsurprisingly, China's impact varies across countries and is unintended because these countries are distinct. Rather than simply using themes and countries as examples, it would have been interesting to see the book explore either themes or cases more systematically and sequentially. This approach would have made the argument more consequential and compelling.

Despite these limitations, the book makes a well-argued and excellent contribution to China–Southeast Asian studies. I highly recommend it. 

⁵ Angela Tritto and Alvin Camba, "The Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia: A Mixed Methods Examination," *Journal of Contemporary China* 32, no. 141 (2023): 436–54.

Author's Response:
Understanding China's Complex Presence in Southeast Asia

Enze Han

I am deeply honored that my book *The Ripple Effect: China's Complex Presence in Southeast Asia* has been discussed by prominent scholars in the field of Southeast Asian international relations in this *Asia Policy* roundtable. I am humbled by their praise and recognition of the book's contributions and the perspective it brings to China–Southeast Asia relations. In this response essay, I will share some reflections on the four reviews and offer clarifications on the scope of the book. Additionally, I will address the inherent limitations of my efforts to explore the immensely complex relationship that China shares with its Southeast Asian neighbors.

I am particularly grateful for the recognition of my efforts to disaggregate the various Chinese actors—both state and nonstate—and to highlight the unintended consequences of their actions. As Alice Ba aptly notes in her review, studies on China–Southeast Asia relations and foreign policy often “correlate effects with intention,” overlooking the “messiness of a social reality in which actors operate with their own logics and contribute their own interactive effects and pressures on relations.” This observation resonates deeply with my approach. My goal in writing this book was to offer a counterthesis and alternative lens through which to view China's influence in Southeast Asia and beyond. In many ways, as long as these points reach a wider audience regarding China's expanding global influence, I believe the book has fulfilled its purpose.

That said, I would like to offer a few clarifications. As Ba and Alvin Camba have noted, my coverage of Southeast Asia shows some unevenness, with a greater empirical focus on the mainland countries than on the maritime ones. This reflects both the limitations of my scholarship and the immense challenge of addressing this highly diverse region. As many scholars of Southeast Asia would agree, no one can truly possess expertise on all the countries in the region. Consequently, there have been some blind spots and limitations in attempts to present Southeast Asia as a cohesive whole. I have spent many years conducting research in Myanmar and Thailand, which is reflected in the book's substantive coverage of these

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countries; however, I must acknowledge my expertise extends less deeply to countries such as the Philippines, for example.

Relatedly, Camba observes that the book's disciplinary engagement focuses on political science and international relations (IR) while overlooking existing scholarship in fields such as geography and sociology, the latter being Camba's own area of expertise. He suggests that my contribution is not novel, as others have already examined the complexity of China's multifaceted presence in Southeast Asia. While this critique is valid to some extent, the book's primary aim was to address key debates within political science and IR—disciplines in which I am trained and the primary audience for which the book is intended. Engaging comprehensively with other disciplines, such as geography and sociology, while valuable, was beyond the scope of this work. Nonetheless, I acknowledge the importance of interdisciplinary perspectives and appreciate the insights this critique provides for future research.

Benjamin Ho's critique focuses on my deliberate exclusion of the security dimension in analyzing China's relations with Southeast Asia. The reason for this exclusion is that existing IR literature already places significant emphasis on the security lens, particularly on topics such as territorial disputes in the South China Sea. I felt that I could not offer new insights on these issues in the book without reiterating the extensive body of work already available in both academic and policy circles. I agree with Ho's assessment that "issues on the security front often end up torpedoing any marginal gains obtained from economic and cultural spheres." Security issues, especially those receiving substantial media coverage, do tend to create a greater ripple effect than other areas of influence. However, as I discuss in the book—and a view I continue to hold—much of China's influence on public opinion in Southeast Asia stems from the activities of nonstate actors, such as ordinary Chinese individuals or businesses. These actions often have a more significant impact on everyday life in society than higher-level security concerns.

I also appreciate that Sharon Seah wrote a review of my book, given that she is the lead author of *The State of Southeast Asia* series of survey reports, which have become some of the most influential data sources on Southeast Asian perceptions of great-power politics and U.S.-China competition in recent years. Her review draws on the rich data presented in these surveys that has shown the limits of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia and the persistently low levels of trust toward China in the region.

As Seah points out, it is important to move beyond simplistic binary views of China's image in Southeast Asia—whether China is more loved or feared, especially in comparison with the United States. This aligns with the thesis of my book: regardless of whether China is loved, feared, or detested, its profound presence in Southeast Asia—shaped by geographic proximity and demographic size—demands careful attention and analysis. This also touches on a point raised by Camba regarding whether Southeast Asia is unique in this regard compared to other parts of the world. In my view, China's influence in Southeast Asia is indeed unique, given its long history of engagement and migration. This historical context provides the institutional and cultural filters through which China's presence is interpreted.

As for Camba's argument about whether state and private actors in China can truly be considered separate—given that private actors often maintain significant links to the state—I must respectfully disagree. This perspective reflects a limited understanding of the complexities and internal dynamics of relationships within the Chinese context. Indeed, as *The Ripple Effect* discusses in the context of the illicit political economy, many Chinese criminal networks now have a significant negative impact on law-and-order issues in the region. However, linking these networks to the Chinese state—despite attempts by some—would be a considerable stretch and lacks substantive evidence.

Overall, I must express my deepest gratitude to the reviewers for taking the time to contribute to this roundtable on my book. I hope the conversations sparked here will continue to inspire further discussion and perhaps challenge some of the conventional views on China's relations with Southeast Asia and beyond. ♦